Home Life on Early Ranches of Southwest Texas

CHAPTER I

The Elijah Ray Family

Bee County

THE old two-story ranch house known as the Elijah Ray house with its green shutters stands today among the trees about one mile from the historic San Antonio River in the Charco community, just off the old cattle trail over which thousands of Texas cattle were driven to Kansas as a living evidence of the lusty, hardy pioneer life that is forever gone. But it was the corner stone of the present civilization that is enjoyed by the citizens of Texas today.

It was built in the early 1870's of kiln-cured lumber brought from old Indianola or Rockport to a dealer in Cuero by ox wagons. Mr. Ray purchased it and brought it on to its present location by mule wagons. Colonial in design with a porch across the entire front, both upstairs and down, a hall between the two front rooms, heated by fireplaces in the ends, it replaced the old "Big Log House" of four rooms. Mr. and Mrs. Ray had moved here to their new place of 320 acres of land in 1864. The house contained two large rooms, 20 x 20, with a hall, 30 x 30, between. A shed room ran across the back which was used for bed rooms. The kitchen was located about five or six feet just north of the house. The main rooms were heated by fireplaces in each end. Both the old and new house contained a bathroom in which was located a tin bath tub, but did not have running water.

The three youngest Ray children were born in the old log house. All four of the Ray girls were married in the present house. George Ray brought his bride from Collin county to this house.

"We all came down those steps trembling," reminisced Emma Ray Powell, as she looked tenderly at the old stairway in the hall.

Mr. Ray was a native of Mississippi who came to Texas in 1850 with his wife and two young children. His wife died in their little log cabin of one room shortly after their arrival. A few years later he married Mary Cox, of Helena, Karnes county, also a native of Mississippi.

He could not enter the army during the Civil War because he had only one lung. But he faithfully cared for the women and children in that community while the fathers and husbands were away in the army. He enlisted in the State Militia, comprising a part of the home guard; became agent for various parties in that community to keep up their brands, and to care for their cattle as best he could while they were away. He went into the cattle business by trading some horses to William Menefee for an interest in a herd of cattle belonging to Captain Barton Peck. Mr. Menefee had a five-year contract with Captain Peck to take care of his cattle for one-fourth the increase. At the expiration of the remaining three years of the contract he had a nice herd of nine hundred cattle for his part, but lost heavily during a drouth about the close of the war. Mr. Ray continued to work the remnant of his herds and still had charge of brands for several other cattlemen until 1873 when fifty per cent of his stock perished in another drouth.

Becoming discouraged he sold his stock to W. A. Pettus and started raising sheep. In 1880 the sheep were disposed of and again he entered the cattle business in which he continued until his death. He accumulated about 20,000 acres of land beside cattle, fine horses and fine mules. He crossed his cattle with Durham, Devon and Brahmas. For several years a general merchandise store was conducted near his home, handling a full supply of dry goods, groceries and whiskey. Whiskey was bought in the barrel and sold in bottles.

In order to keep the cattle from "Going South with the Wind" during the early Texas northers Mr. Ray built the first drift fence in Goliad and Bee counties. He was interested in the affairs of the community and built a school house on his land for the children of the community. This was used for both school and church.

Mrs. Ray, a kindly, pleasant soul with a low gentle voice, courageous as pioneer women had to be, was busy doing the tasks that demanded her attention, washing, ironing, patching, mending, baking, churning, caring for the chickens and the roses. She had a negro woman who helped with the house work. The Ray home, noted for its hospitality, was the stopping place for their many friends who traveled the roads from Corpus Christi and Victoria to San Antonio.

"In fact the children slept on a pallet most of the time," said Emma Ray Powell, "because they had to give up their beds to company."

Groceries could be secured quickly from Mr. Ray's store near by. There was always a supply of milk and butter from the home herd of from ten to fifteen range cows. Approximately twenty-five hogs were butchered each year and hung in the smokehouse. A flock of poultry provided plenty of that meat and eggs for home consumption, but there was no market for the surplus. A pack of hounds was kept to protect both the chickens and turkeys from the wolves. Red beans were bought from the store. If any one in the country had a garden Mrs. Ray did. They had both biscuits and cornbread. Wheat was bought from the store, but the meal was ground at a near-by grist mill from home-grown corn. Bee gums, kept in the back yard, provided a supply of honey. An old man who helped Mrs. Ray with the flowers had charge of the bees. Milk and butter were kept in the "dairy" which was a home-made cupboard, boarded across the back. The sides and front were enclosed in screen wire. The shelves were bored with several holes large enough to allow free passage of air. These shelves were then covered with about two inches of clean

DEDICATION

•

The names "Alamo" and "Goliad" have been magic names to me ever since, as a youngster, I read the meager reports in the history of Texas of the struggle of those heroes who won the fight which gave Texas its independence. But since I have had, for the past several years, the pleasure and privilege of serving the citizens in 24 Southwest Texas counties as a district home demonstration agent I am firmly convinced that the conquest of Southwest Texas was not wholly made with the accompaniment of flaunting banners and martial music but in the every day lives of those citizens who lived there after the war. The homes of those people were the responsibility of both parents. The father's responsibility was to provide food, shelter and protection from wild animals and Indians, the mother's responsibility was to keep "the home fires burning," bring babies into the world frequently without the aid or advice of an attending physician. Many of those early homemakers left a home of culture and refinement "to follow her man." In pioneering in a new and unknown country she washed, ironed the clothes, scrubbed the floors and prepared the food with practically no equipment; spun the cotton or wool and wove it into cloth from which she clothed her family. When the husband left home to drive cattle to the market she was left some times for weeks with her children in the lonely cabin. He never knew whether he would return to find a home and family swept away completely by a band of marauding Indians. Nor could she feel that he would return home safely; that he might fill that grave on the "lone prairie" beside the cattle trail far away. They had not only to conquer, but to live off the land. They were the unsung heroes of a great battle of civilization. Theirs was a lonely victory. Love of home, and children were the dominant factors in their lives. Cold and hunger were frequent experiences—danger, their constant companion.

They lived intensely and amply. They looked their problems square in the face and solved them as they came. They lived unselfishly and cheerfully. They had an ideal—a oneness and unity of purpose—of bettering their condition, of giving their children better opportunities in life.

But their lives were not all made up of work, hardships, privations and Indian scares. The few available books and magazines were really read and discussed. Friendliness and hospitality, were traits indigenous to the country. Spending the Saturday night and Sunday with a neighbor, quiltings, dances or parties according to the customs of the community, weddings and church services were probably greater treats because of their rarity. "We did not think much about hard times, because we had such good times when we did get together," one grandmother told me.

Buying a dresser, a range for cooking were great events in their family life. "There was a great rejoicing in our family when the new piano was moved in," another one told me.

They were ever alert to do whatever could be done to instill in their children a desire for the better things of life. "My prayer was my children must never be satisfied with things as they are," or "I knew if the desire was deep enough they would seek them as they grew older" and we find their children in the front ranks of progress today.

But my greatest inspiration is to sit around the hearth, or at a gathering and listen to these early homemakers talk about the early times as a matter "of course." Our neighbor "the So and So's" had "so much harder time than we did." The courage and fortitude and cheerfulness with which these "old timers" lived is a priceless heritage and pride of their children today.

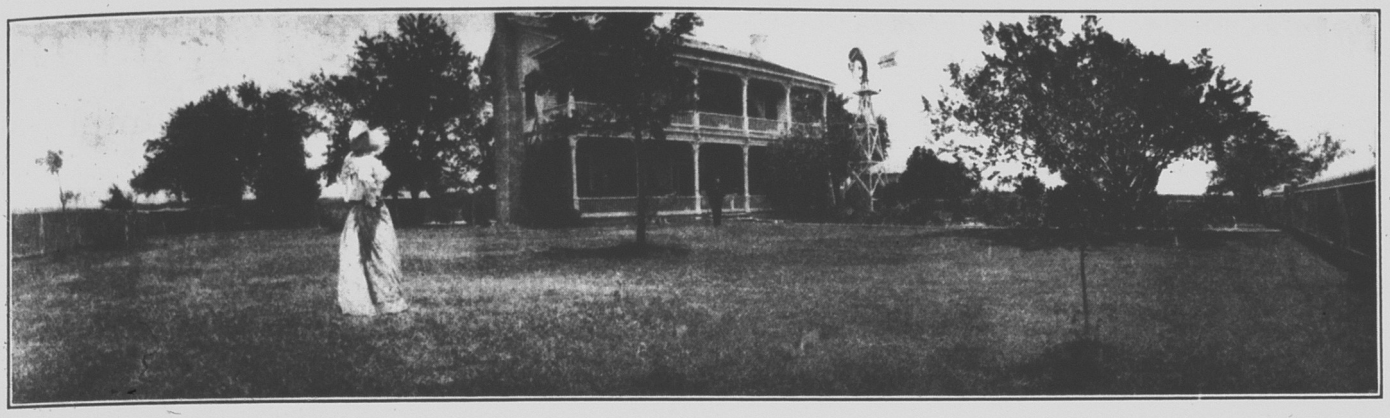
As a token of my gratitude and appreciation to the pioneer families who paved the way for civilization that we enjoy today I present this series of articles of "Home Life on Early Ranches of Southwest Texas."

MYRTLE MURRAY.

By MYRTLE MURRAY

District Agent, Extension Service

College Station, Texas



The Elijah Ray ranch house, built in the early 70's. Mr. Ray is standing in the gate just before starting to get married for the third time. This picture was made in 1897.

damp coarse sand from Hoard's Creek. The containers of milk and butter were placed in the moist sand and kept cool.

Mrs. Ray earned her spending money by selling bees wax. One of her choicest "buys" was a dining table and six chairs. The children also had their own spending money.

The night Emma Ray, the eldest child, was born, a mare colt was also born. Her father gave it to her and the increase was always hers. As each child was born it was given a calf. The brand for each child was registered and always kept up. In this way each had a small herd of cattle. When a calf or steer was sold the money was given to the owner and was used in buying clothing.

"I did without a dress one winter to buy a dresser," declared Emma Ray Powell. "It was things like that which made home dearer."

The children had another source of income though. They picked up the calves that were dropped from the herds of cattle that were trailed past their home.

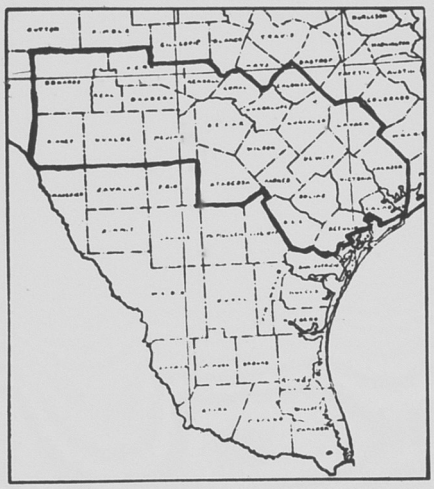
The only trip the children had when growing up was to New Orleans where they atended the exposition. They obtained their money by selling hides from the cattle that died during an extremely cold winter. They had experienced a very dry year and the cattle were in poor condition. Northers came and after the weather moderated the cattlemen skinned the dead cattle—each keeping the hides containing his brand.

The Rays lived twenty-three miles from Goliad where the nearest physician lived. The Ray children all came into the world without the aid of a physician. Mrs. Ray won the everlasting gratitude of many of her neighbors through her services as a mid-wife. She always kept a supply of home remedies, and knew how to use them. For a sprained ankle she applied red clay wet with vinegar. Pain in the various parts of the body was relieved by applying cloths wrung out of hot vinegar. And soap was made according to the moon.

The frontier country had its advantages as well as its disadvantages. There were so few people living in that country that the children were seldom exposed to contagious diseases. None of the Ray children had the measles or whooping cough.

The children attended school at Red Bluff. The three eldest rode a little Spanish pony called *Cotton Tail.*

"George was not very polite to us," observed one sister. "He would not let us ride in the saddle. And I always had to ride on the tail."



Locale of "Home Life of the Early Ranches of Southwest Texas." Twenty-four counties—Atascosa, Bandera, Bee, Bexar, Caldwell, Calhoun, Comal, DeWitt, Edwards, Goliad, Gonzales, Guadalupe, Jackson, Karnes, Kendall, Kerr, Kinney, Lavaca, Medina, Real, Refugio, Uvalde, Victoria and Wilson.

Later, Emma, Fannie and George attended school at Professor Brook's school in Goliad, all starting at the same time. Emma came home first to let Mary go, then Jennie went next. The school had a dormitory for boys and one for girls. Rooms were made by hanging up sheets for the walls. They were equipped with a bedstead, wash bowl and pitcher on a wash stand. Some of the younger children later attended school at Southwestern University at Georgetown. All of the girls were given some training in music, except Emma. She took elocution.

There was great rejoicing in the Ray home the day the Baby Grand piano was purchased.

Mr. and Mrs. Ray did not permit the children to dance at home, but did not object to their attending dances. The girls took dancing lessons from a local dancing teacher. They usually went in the Ray surrey that accommodated four couples.

They enjoyed company in the winter most, because the young folks rode horses and hunted quail. All of the Ray girls were good hunters. Emma was the best marksman.

They all helped with the housework. The churning was probably the most dreaded chore. It was done by using an old fashioned dasher; later by suspending a small tin churn fastened lengthwise to the limb of a tree and pushing it back and forth.

"I hated to churn so badly," smiled Emma Ray Powell, "that I always vowed that I would never make a child churn or wear a split-tail apron."

The Ray home was noted for its beautiful flowers and for its attractive yard. "Our roses were known far and near," said one of the girls. "Why, we even gathered them by the tubsful."

Four of the children are still living. They are George Ray of Pettus—he purchased the old homestead and is having it restored; Emma Ray, widow of N. R. Powell, lives on a nearby ranch; Mary Ray is Mrs. H. M. Carroll, and Jennie is Mrs. H. F. Kaufman, both of whom live in San Antonio.

Next: Joel Fenley.

You Know Me, Folks

World's Champion Cowboys Use My Equipment. Ride and Wear the Best. Southwest's Leading Cowboy Outfitter.

Write for Catalogue

PROSSER MARTIN

Cowboy Outfitter

Del Rio, Texas

On the Banks of the Rio Grande